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The Caspian Gates

EXPLORING THE MOST FAMOUS MOUNTAIN
VALLEY OF THE ANCIENT WORLD



The 'Gates' at Dariali Gorge, set amid the spectacular mountain scenery of modern Georgia, was a place of legend. It features in a wider range of ancient and medieval sources than any other mountain pass, yet it has long been ignored by archaeologists. **Eberhard Sauer**, **Lana Chologauri** and **Davit Naskidashvili** reveal the secrets of this remote site that for so long remained shrouded in mystery.

Dariali Gorge was a place of legend. It was in the dramatic landscape of the gorge that ancient author Lucian of Samosata envisaged Prometheus riveted to the rocks high up on its sheer cliffs, his liver endlessly devoured by an eagle – the mythical hero's punishment for stealing fire from the gods. Emperor Nero launched a military campaign to the gorge. Troops were gathered from as far as Britain. The XIVth Legion, a battle-hardened crack unit feared ever since it crushed Boudicca's rebellion, advanced to these far-flung eastern margins of the continent.

Nero's early death in AD 68 put an end to that venture, but not to Rome's interest in the strategic mountain pass. It provided the main route across the central Caucasus, Europe's highest mountain range. Featured in the works of Tacitus, Suetonius, Statius, and Ptolemy, among others, its fame spread also to the heartlands of Persia: in the AD 260s, King Shapur boasted ownership of the gorge in rock-cut inscriptions in Iran. Numerous northern invaders, from the Scythians to German Nazis, headed to the gorge, attempting to break through to Transcaucasia and the Near East. In Late Antiquity, the gorge, jointly with ►



BELOW The relief of King Shapur at Naqsh-e Rostam near Persepolis, whose empire stretched from modern Iraq to Pakistan. It shows his triumph over the defeated Roman emperors Philip the Arab and Valerian.



ALL IMAGES: E Sauer, L Chologauri, D Naskidashvili, unless otherwise stated

A PLACE OF LEGEND

Dariali Gorge has many names: the Caspian Gates, the Caucasian Gates, and the Gates of Iberia (eastern Georgia). It is also known as the Gates of the Sarmatians and the Gates of the Alans, after the tribal groups who roamed the region north of the Caucasus. This last gives the site its modern name: Dar-i-ali means 'Door of the Alans'.

The fiercely fast-flowing River Terek cuts through the steep-sided gorge that runs for nearly 15km along the base of Mount Kazbek, about 165km north of Tbilisi. Awe-inspiring today, the gorge was even narrower before it was widened using explosives in the 19th century, as illustrated by the French artist Pierre Blanchard (shown below). Blanchard travelled through the gorge in 1857, witnessing Russian engineers blasting their route through the rocks.



IMAGE: courtesy of Dadiani Palaces History and Architectural Museum

MAIN IMAGE & BELOW The gorge's vertical cliffs rise to dizzy heights, shown here near Dariali Fort (on a conical rock). The cliffs inspired the belief that it was here that Prometheus was chained to the rocks.





ABOVE & RIGHT Gun emplacements linked to a tunnel system under Dariali Fort, as well as bunkers overlooking the valley, may date to 1942, when German troops advanced within 20 miles of the gorge. Those in control of the fort had a stranglehold on north-south traffic, in the 20th century as much as in antiquity.



the Caspian coastal defences at Derbent, formed a cornerstone in Persia's efforts to keep steppe warriors at bay. Persia demanded payments of thousands of pounds of gold from the late Roman Empire to guard the mountain passes of the Caucasus. The 10th-century Baghdad-born and Egypt-based author Mas'udi describes the impregnable fort controlling the narrow pass as world-famous. Throughout the 1st millennium AD, the remote gorge formed a talking point at Imperial capitals.

No mountain valley in the ancient and medieval world achieved similar literary fame, but archaeologically it has remained uncharted territory – until now. Seen and described by early travellers, it was not until the dying days of the Soviet Union some 25 years ago that the construction of a gas pipeline led to the first large-scale excavations.

Georgian archaeologists unearthed parts of a medieval cemetery near the fort, as well as a 6th- to 8th-century graveyard some 2.5km further south. Grave goods include a coin of Persian King Kavad, dated to AD 529, as well as a ring with a Persian inscription. Procopius attests that the Persians had lost the strategic mountain pass to a group of Huns – or perhaps other steppe warriors – and that King Kavad succeeded in reconquering it. The imports may have reached Dariali

Gorge in the aftermath of these events. No more than a small sondage was excavated then on Dariali Fort, the key stronghold controlling one of the narrowest passages.

Yet there was still little archaeological interest in this gorge that features so prominently in the works of both Classical authors and modern ancient historians.

Intrepid explorers

In August 2012, a small group of archaeologists, including two of the authors and Professor Michael Vickers and Dr Manana Odisheli from Oxford

University, ventured into the valley. Today, as for much of the past two millennia, the gorge is borderland. The only access to the famous fort was via a bridge in no-man's land on the border with Russia, and we could do no more than glance at the fort across the deadly rapids of the River Tergi. Finally, in April the following year, permission was granted for access via the border zone.

The trip was still far from easy, and demonstrated dramatically the difficulties involved in crossing Europe's highest mountain range. Lorries travelling on the main land route between Armenia, Georgia, and Russia, stuck in deep snow, blocked our way. Eventually, guided by Dr Davit Mindorashvili, head of excavations a generation before, we reached our destination. Recent earth-moving operations had uncovered graves, and we examined parts of a human skull in freezing temperatures. By June, a joint expedition between Tbilisi State University and the Universities of Edinburgh and Durham was born. Even in June, conditions were challenging. Frequent torrential rain and low temperatures tested the team's endurance to the limit.

In Dariali Gorge, one is constantly confronted with the power of nature. Massive avalanches of soil and rocks, building up on the glaciers of Mount

BELOW Dariali's garrison faced a brutal climate: snow at Dariali Fort on 17 April 2013.



RIGHT Dariali Fort, seen across the terrifying waters of the River Tergi.

Kazbek, frequently crush into the valley, burying the road, damming the river, and causing flash floods. In 2014 alone, two major landslides occurred, blocking all overland traffic for weeks. Mud flows and the powerful floods of the River Tergi destroyed two short-lived footbridges in 2013/2014. On the eve of the 2016 season, the river washed away hundreds of metres of road, for a fortnight cutting off access to our site and all overland traffic between Georgia and Russia.

Such cataclysmic events, and the bitter cold in winter, make one appreciate the strategic significance of the valley. Travellers and soldiers serving at the pass often faced brutal living conditions in a harsh, if stunningly beautiful, Alpine environment. Would this transit route have been so heavily used and guarded for much of the past two millennia had there been an easier bypass? Despite natural obstacles, we persisted for four summer seasons, and have been able to unravel some of the archaeological secrets of the gorge.

The walls of the fort have been seen and described by many passing travellers. But when were they built? The semi-legendary Georgian chronicles claim that the kings of Iberia (eastern Georgia) were in control as early as the 2nd century BC. It was Rome's expanding military might in the 1st century AD that brought the remote mountain valley into the literary limelight. A detailed account is provided by Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 6.30):



Next, there are the Caucasian Gates, called in great error by many the Caspian [Gates], an enormous natural monument where there is an abrupt break in the mountains and where gates, of iron-covered timbers, have been installed. Centrally underneath them flows a rapid river of horrible smell, whilst on the defenders' side there is a small fort on a rock, called 'Cumania', fortified to hold back innumerable tribes from crossing [the mountains]. Here, lying opposite notably the Iberian town of Hermastus, the world is divided by gates.

RIGHT Did sulphur springs, such as this one on the banks of the Tergi, inspire rumours of the river water's horrible smell?

BELOW LEFT Solid mortar was used to reinforce the walls of the early fort, a response, perhaps, to the threat of Hunnic invasion.

BELOW RIGHT Dariali Fort, towering high over the River Tergi, fits Pliny's description of the rocky stronghold called Cumania.

Pliny's topographical description is remarkably accurate – perhaps informed by Roman agents operating in Iberia in the AD 60s and 70s. The only mistake concerns the alleged smell of the river flowing past the fort. It is odourless, but the rumour may have been inspired by sulphur springs in the area.

Pliny's fort?

Was it the fort described by Pliny whose walls survive to the present day? We excavated parts of a room on the inside of the outer fort wall with identical masonry style to the outer wall. Multiple radiocarbon samples provide a clear answer:

the fort was built more than 300 years after Pliny perished (during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79). The fort can now be dated very precisely: a bone embedded in the masonry at the base of a fort wall dates to no earlier than AD 390. Bones from the deepest layers abutting the wall are no later than AD 396. So, with a probability of over 90%, construction works on the surviving fort started between 390 and 396.

Unlike later medieval walls, it employed solid mortar, tough as concrete. What ➤





ABOVE LEFT In the interior, we found late antique structures, some of them later than the outer defences, and medieval drystone walls.

ABOVE RIGHT A now dilapidated stone barrier (with a ranging pole on top: foreground right), fortified with a tower (middle ground) led from Dariali Fort (in the background) to a sheer cliff opposite – blocking the ancient route. Any attempt to cross, without the garrison's consent, would have been akin to a suicide mission.

LEFT In AD 395, the Huns crossed the Caucasus via Dariali Gorge, invading Transcaucasia and the Near East. The map plots (in red) territories and cities reportedly reached, spreading terror across some of the richest provinces of the Eastern Roman and Persian Empires. Was this the stimulus to heavily fortify the stronghold?

motivated the construction of such a well-built fort?

In AD 395, the Huns broke through the Caucasus. The sources make clear that they chose a route across the centre of the mountain range – almost certainly Dariali. On this occasion the Huns penetrated further into the Near East than ever before or since. The radius of their raids, venturing as far as the Ankara area of modern Turkey, Lebanon, and central Mesopotamia, reached more than 1,000km beyond the mountain gorge, and included some of the richest and most fertile lands of the Near East. These regions belonged to the Eastern Roman Empire and to Persia, so both powers had

a strong incentive to plug the hole in their natural defences: it can be no coincidence that the most significant Hunnic invasion of south-west Asia and the construction of our fort appear to have occurred at a similar time. Perhaps the fort was built in response to the event, or maybe construction work had already started, and the Huns succeeded in making their way across just before the route was sealed off.

It is the late antique Persian fort, mentioned in the sources, whose remains still prominently survive today. They comprise a ring of rooms around the inner edge of the steep escarpment, with stone buildings inside. A road-blocking barrier, employing the same

solid mortar and masonry style, must be contemporary.

Did Pliny refer to a different fort? Perhaps, but none has ever been identified convincingly that would fit his description. More probably, the fort of Pliny's days was completely demolished to make way for its late antique successor. Our walls were built directly on the bedrock. Building them on top of earlier occupation horizons and dilapidated walls would have seriously

BELOW LEFT Laser-scanning map of Dariali Fort by Dr Malkhaz Datukishvili and Giorgi Kvaratskhelia, showing the fort's topography, our trenches on top (up to 2015), and parts of the road-blocking barrier.

BELOW The walls of Dariali Fort were built on bedrock in the AD 390s.





LEFT Excavation of an early medieval collective grave (AD 671-770).

LEFT (BELOW) Gveleti Castle, protected by steep cliffs, overlooks the road, 3.5km south of Dariali Fort. Our excavations have shown that occupation dates back to the later 1st millennium.

INSET A bone artefact, whose animal carvings have Khazar parallels, studied by Lana Chologauri.

whose descendants reportedly held the fort for over two centuries. Evidence for pork consumption and a Georgian graffito dating to shortly before or after the conquest paint a more nuanced picture, and suggest that not all garrison members were strict Muslims. The garrison's mission, to keep the south secure from the northern threat, was as important in the early Middle Ages as it had been in antiquity. The Khazars had established a powerful state north of the Caucasus and repeatedly succeeded in breaking through to the south.

A second stronghold and obstacle to military invasion, at Gveleti to the south of Dariali Fort, appears to date back to the time of Muslim-Khazar confrontations.

Living conditions in Dariali Gorge were tough. Excavations of a cemetery south of the fort, dating from around the 8th century AD to the turn of the millennium, revealed evidence for frequent episodes ▶

compromised their stability. Evidently, the top of the hill was stripped down to the bedrock before construction work on the late 4th-century AD fort could begin. Perhaps early demolition debris survives at the base of the rock, but it will require a large operation to find it.

Excavation in 2016 at the base of the fort's western cliffs revealed more than 6m of medieval deposits. These massive quantities of dumped medieval debris buried the lower section of the vertical cliff. In antiquity, Dariali Fort was protected by much higher cliffs than today. Nobody knows how much deeper we would need to dig to reach the earliest layers – probably many metres more. A bone sample pre-dating Pliny's time, from the near the bottom of cultivation horizons on a terrace south of the fort, suggests that the occupation of the fort indeed dates back to the 1st century AD or earlier. At the southern base of the rock we found cinders of a fire of the

6th to 4th century BC, perhaps lit by early occupants, perhaps by a passing traveller. As yet, the date of the stronghold's earliest occupation remains a mystery.

Bulwark of the Caliphate

While the ancient history of Dariali Fort has attracted most scholarly interest, it played a similar, or even more important role, during the 8th-10th centuries AD, a time that saw it under Muslim control. It was during this era that vast quantities of animal bone and ceramics accumulated, more than in any phase before or since. It is possible that this reflects in part increased intramural rubbish disposal, but there is no doubt that this was an era of heavy occupation.

Around AD 730, the remote outpost was conquered by the Caliphate, which stationed an Arab garrison on the spot

RIGHT Burial of a young man, aged 15-20, with a sword (BELOW) and two arrowheads, dating to AD 975-1029.



IMAGE: Nino Kamkamidze



LEFT Excavations on the ridge. Dariali Fort is in the background.

BELOW Fortifications on an impregnable steep ridge a kilometre north of Dariali Fort. Building walls along the precipice would have been difficult and dangerous – evidence for the enormous efforts invested to prevent steppe warriors from crossing the Caucasus.



of malnutrition or stress. Shortages occurred despite strenuous efforts to sustain the garrison. Mutton and beef featured prominently on the menu, and well over a tonne of animal bones have been examined by our experts, Dr Marjan Mashkour and her students. A similar quantity of pottery has been studied by Dr Seth Priestman.

Our landscape team from Durham found evidence for widespread terraced agriculture making the most of difficult terrain. Isotope analysis and a note by Arab author Mas'udi attest that occupants benefited from food provisions sent from the south. Supply convoys from Tbilisi across the Caucasus will have reached the site only sporadically, as snow, avalanches, and landslides can cut off the valley from the outside world.

Unsurprisingly, life could also be violent in the contested mountain defile. One individual's skull was struck from behind by a bladed weapon. The fatal injury, examined by Dr Elena Kranioti, suggests a sabre attack. He died between 988 and 1027, and thus was probably one of the last to be buried in the cemetery.

Around the turn of the millennium, burials with northern grave goods appear. We do not know whether there was a change of garrison, or whether the descendants of the Muslim garrison adapted to pagan traditions. In the 12th century, the fort became part of the Kingdom of Georgia and, leaving aside the interlude of Russian Soviet occupation, has remained a border post of Georgia to the present day. Dariali Gorge, already under Iberian control two millennia ago, and at the borders of the Persian Empire and the Muslim world for many centuries,

has been frontier territory for most of the past 2,000 years – a remarkable case of continuity determined by geography.

A unique strategic asset

There has been a fashion among archaeologists of recent generations, never personally confronted with the realities of war, to dismiss ancient and medieval fortifications as largely symbolic. Yet it is hard to believe that people would have put their lives at risk by building substantial walls at the edge of deep precipices to make no more than a symbolic statement.

Surely such great efforts to sustain a garrison in a hostile environment would not have been made unless there were tangible benefits. Anybody having witnessed how fast boulders roll down steep Caucasian slopes, and how narrow the passage is in places, can be in no doubt that those in control of strategic heights could have inflicted heavy casualties on those attempting to break through the defences. Moreover, no coins were found in the fort, and there is nothing to suggest that taxing trade provided a major source

of income. The 18th-century traveller Jacob Reineggs captures the function of the fort succinctly:

Whoever built this fortification or mountain castle, to protect the border of Armenia or Georgia from the hostile incursions of the tribes occupying the northern Caucasus, could at the time not have chosen a better place for defence than this one, even now still adequate, where a thousand men can block the way for several hundred thousand and make their passage impossible.

Despite its harsh environment, there was no easier route across the central Caucasus and no better place to control trans-Caucasian traffic than at Derbent and Dariali – and that is what made Dariali a place of military significance and enduring fame. ■

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